

Rural Economy and Social Relations in the Countryside

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For a long time, the history of the Byzantine countryside was linked to that of law, institutions, and fiscal practice: such was the perspective of Franz Dölger, instanced especially by his *Beiträge*, published in 1927, in which juridical texts are closely scrutinized and the meaning of many fiscal terms explained.¹ At that time, even when known documents—which were few, often poorly published, and little studied—were taken into account, they were called upon to enforce a representation of the rural world chiefly derived from administrative texts. Shortly thereafter, in Alexander Solov'ev and Vladimir Mošin's edition of the Greek documents of the Serbian sovereigns,² the emphasis was still on institutions and the explanation of "technical terms"—a notion that has since been somewhat abused. With the advent of Georg Ostrogorsky's works in the 1940s, rural history became a social history; a remarkable series of works indeed, in which Ostrogorsky highlighted a figure which to be sure seems today a bit abstract, that of the Byzantine peasant, whose destiny through the centuries he tried to trace.³ The influence of Ostrogorsky's works remains perceptible to this day.

The publication of new documents, the increased attention given to the archives and, above all, archaeological surveys, explain why the rural history of Byzantium has become progressively more concrete and why it develops nowadays through regional studies. Thanks to the works of Hélène Ahrweiler on the Smyrna area, Angeliki Laiou on the rural economy of eastern Macedonia, Anthony Bryer on Trebizond, and Jean-Marie Martin on southern Italy, the history of the countryside has become more diverse.⁴

¹F. Dölger, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der byzantinischen Finanzverwaltung besonders des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig–Berlin, 1927; repr. Hildesheim, 1960).

²Fontes rerum Slavorum meridionalium, series sexta, Fontes lingua graeca conscripti, tomus 1, *Diplomata graeca regum et imperatorum Serviae*, ed. A. Solov'ev and V. Mošin (Belgrade, 1936).

³G. Ostrogorsky, "Vizantijskie Piscov'ie Knigi," *BSI* 9 (1948), 203–306; idem, *Pour l'histoire de la féodalité byzantine* (Brussels, 1954); idem, *Quelques problèmes d'histoire de la paysannerie byzantine* (Brussels, 1956); idem, "La commune rurale byzantine, Loi agraire—Traité fiscal—Cadastre de Thèbes," *Byzantion* 32 (1962), 139–66.

⁴H. Ahrweiler, "L'histoire et la géographie de la région de Smyrne entre les deux occupations turques (1081–1317) particulièrement au XIII^e siècle," *TM* 1 (1965), 1–204; A. E. Laiou-Thomadakis, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: A Social and Demographic Study* (Princeton, N.J., 1977); A. Bryer and D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1985); J.-M. Martin, "Città e campagna: Economia e società (sec. VII–XIII)," in *Storia del Mezzogiorno*, ed. G. Galasso

The old idea of the constant decline of the Eastern Empire, along with an Eisensteinian vision of history, durably molded a “dramatic” representation—to quote Ostrogorsky’s expression⁵—of rural life. In this view, after a supposed golden age—around the seventh and eighth centuries—“feudalism” would have brought dire consequences for the rural population: submission to the landlords, merciless exploitation, and finally utter decline.⁶

Credit is due to Paul Lemerle for having reacted against these preconceptions with an uncompromising positivism, illustrated in his *Agrarian History of Byzantium*, the original version of which was published in 1958.⁷ Suspending the resolution of questions he deemed premature, he called for a careful reexamination of the sources and established, chiefly in the area of institutions, the firm ground on which research could thereafter progress. In the following years, the works of Nicolas Svoronos and Alexander Kazhdan have sharpened our vision on numerous counts, as well as enlarged the field for reflection.⁸ As a result, in the past twenty years or so, a broader documentation and an enriched problematic have enabled several scholars to advance the notion of a rise whereas others are still talking of decline.

The gap between a still strong “Ostrogorskian” current and less pessimistic scholars has crystallized around three issues: the demographic evolution of the empire, the condition of the peasant holding, and the definition of the peasants’ social status.

To be sure, there are no data on the population of the empire, and the indirect clues available on its evolution have only lately been taken into account. Such being the case, only very general reasonings have been put forth. In particular, it has often been estimated that periods which saw the predominance of small peasant property—the latter considered in the historiography of the 1950s as a quasi-anthropological ideal—corresponded to demographic highs; and, conversely, that periods which witnessed the domination of sizable estates, termed with a pejorative connotation “latifundia,” were ones of scarcity of people. Within this alternative, the cause-and-effect relationship between number and status of peasants functioned, according to different authors, in one direction or the other. Similarly, invasions were tentatively explained by depopulation and supposed to cause an increase in the number of men. It was on such fragile ground that the picture was composed of a numerous population in the seventh to eighth centuries, due to Slav invasions and predominance of small property, followed by a continuous decline, concurrent with the rise of large estates—a decline that would supposedly be-

and R. Romeo, *III, Alto Medioevo* (Napoli, 1990), 257–382. Other important studies and surveys would have to be mentioned here. The bibliography given in this paper does not pretend to be complete; I hope it reflects the main accounts in the evolution of historiography.

⁵Ostrogorsky, *Paysannerie*, 12.

⁶On “Byzantine feudalism” see A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989), 5–12.

⁷P. Lemerle, “Esquisse pour une histoire agraire de Byzance: Les sources et les problèmes,” *RH* 219 (1958), 33–74, 254–84, and *RH* 220 (1958), 43–94; idem, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium, from the Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Galway, 1979). See also A. P. Kazhdan, *Agrarnye otnošenija v Vizantii, XIII–XV vv.* (Moscow, 1952).

⁸N. Svoronos, “Recherches sur le cadastre byzantin et la fiscalité aux XI^e et XII^e siècles: Le cadastre de Thèbes,” *BCH* 83 (1959), 1–166, repr. in his *Etudes sur l’organisation intérieure, la société et l’économie de l’Empire byzantin* (London, 1973); A. P. Kazhdan, *Derevnja i gorod v Vizantii, IX–X vv.* (Moscow, 1960); A. Kazhdan and A. Cutler, “Continuity and Discontinuity in Byzantine History,” *Byzantion* 52 (1982), 429–78.

come catastrophic in the eleventh century.⁹ In parallel fashion, a 1965 study concluded that numerous villages had been deserted in the eleventh century in Greece and especially in Macedonia.¹⁰ However, the now better known archives of Mount Athos lead us to invalidate this claim.

Second, in the absence of data on agricultural yields, it has been supposed that they were very low, and further that they had not increased, in contrast to what admittedly took place in the medieval West (or at least in thirteenth-century Flanders). Such a stagnation has been viewed as one of the causes of the decline of the Eastern Empire.¹¹ Very low yields would imply, for the peasants to be able to survive, that they cultivated considerable areas, which would in turn indicate, given the technical means at their disposal, superhuman work. In addition, considering the taxes and duties which were levied on the peasants, scholars have endeavored to show that not only were the peasants incapable of investing, but also that their budgets were almost constantly in deficit.¹² However, the concept of investment in monetary form, in a business where work time is not accounted for, is unclear; furthermore, the notion of a near constant deficit should have aroused suspicion.

Third, on the social status of peasants, sources are not lacking. Administrative texts underscore the opposition between owners and tenants, or *paroikoi*. They reveal how certain fiscal mechanisms favored from the tenth century onward the multiplication of the latter at the expense of the former.¹³ They also suggest that the duties levied from the *paroikoi* were double those imposed upon the small owners,¹⁴ and therefore that, on average, they considerably increased. But these data are subject to various possible interpretations. In the "feudalist" perspective, a common pattern of thinking has been to call the owners "free peasants," and to consider the tenants as "dependent" on the landlords, called "seigneurs." Thus, the spread from the eleventh century onward of the term "paroikos" to refer to the peasant has been seen as evidence of a kind of general subjection of the peasant class. However, as we shall see, the term "paroikos" is not univocal.

Peasants less and less numerous, more and more exploited by masters appropriating the output of the land, such is the received view, and perhaps still the dominant one. This view has evolved in the past few years for several reasons: the incongruities to which it led may be one of them, but the main factors in its revision are the diversification of the sources on the one hand, and the effort to frame the rural world into the global structure of Byzantine economic and monetary realities on the other hand. The new picture which is currently shaping up here and there is by no means the optimistic

⁹On that point see J. Lefort, "Population et peuplement en Macédoine orientale, IX^e-XV^e siècle," in *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire byzantin*, ed. V. Kravari, J. Lefort, and C. Morrison, 2 vols. (Paris, 1989-91), II, 64.

¹⁰A. Antoniadis-Bibicou, "Villages désertés en Grèce, un bilan provisoire," in *Villages désertés et histoire économique, XI^e-XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1965), 343-417.

¹¹M. Kaplan, "L'économie paysanne dans l'Empire byzantin du V^e au X^e siècle," *Klio* 68 (1986), 232.

¹²N. Svoronos, "Remarques sur les structures économiques de l'empire byzantin au XI^e siècle," *TM* 6 (1976), 60; Kaplan, "L'économie," 218.

¹³Lemerle, *Agrarian History*, 73-85.

¹⁴N. Oikonomides, "Terres du fisc et revenu de la terre aux Xe-XI^e siècles," in *Hommes et richesses* II, 328.

reversal of the former, but it is more realistic. In this new line of thinking, the aim is to try to assess the place of the peasants in a space, in an economy, and in a society which were less and less secluded from the outside world, and to describe the changes which produced in the fourteenth century a rural world ostensibly different from what it had been in the ninth century. In this paper, I shall try to carry out this goal for those regions of the empire that we are beginning to know better.

I. THE PROGRESSIVE ORGANIZATION OF SPACE. PEOPLE AND LAND

Demographic Evolution

While precise demographic data are still lacking, it is clearer today that there was a considerable increase in population in the Middle Ages, between the two major disasters constituted by the plagues of 541/2 and 1347. Two questions remain unanswered. First, the "recovery time" after the epidemic, which depends on many factors and may vary from a few decades to several centuries,¹⁵ is not known. Second, it remains difficult to establish whether or not the demographic high reached during Roman times was out-run on the eve of the second plague, in the first half of the fourteenth century. To judge by some clues provided by the history of the forest cover in the Thessaloniki area and by the study of the land parcels of one eastern Macedonian village, I am tempted to believe that people were more numerous in that area at the beginning of the fourteenth century than at the beginning of the sixth,¹⁶ but many other geographical and archaeological facts remain to be studied. Whatever the case may be, no one questions that the density of the rural population was high at the beginning of the sixth century, even for those areas for which we cannot rely on such a decisive study as that of Georges Tate on northern Syria.¹⁷ As far as the sixth-century plague, the works of Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Noël Biraben have shown its effects in the West;¹⁸ while it is true that the epidemic strikes more directly the cities than the isolated districts, its disorganizing effect is perceptible everywhere. Let us note that in Cyril Mango's opinion, the population of Constantinople was then cut by half.¹⁹ To turn now to the matter of invasions, it is no longer believed that they are a factor of demographic increase, for, on top of their negative effects, they generally involve only a small quantity of people—as compared to the existing population.²⁰ In Macedonia, what is known of the history of the landscape and of the organization of space suggests that in the ninth century people were still few.²¹ That

¹⁵J.-N. Biraben, "La peste du VI^e siècle dans l'empire byzantin," in *Hommes et richesses* I, 121–25, see p. 123.

¹⁶J. Lefort, "Radolibos: Population et paysage," *TM* 9 (1985), 215; idem, "Population and Landscape in Eastern Macedonia during the Middle Ages: The Example of Radolibos," in *Continuity and Change in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Society*, ed. A. Bryer and H. Lowry (Birmingham-Washington, 1986), 11–21, see p. 20.

¹⁷G. Tate, "Les campagnes de la Syrie du Nord à l'époque proto-byzantine," in *Hommes et richesses* I, 63–77.

¹⁸J.-N. Biraben and J. Le Goff, "La peste dans le Moyen Age," *Annales ESC* 24 (1969), 1484–1510.

¹⁹C. Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople, IV^e–VII^e siècles* (Paris, 1985), 51.

²⁰J.-M. Martin in *Hommes et richesses* II, 84.

²¹Lefort, "Population et peuplement," 66–69.

does not prevent us from supposing an economic and demographic rise, to which Warren Treadgold's works have lately called attention.²²

Beginning in the tenth century, clues indicating an increase in population are more abundant. In recent years, a number of scholars have been led to suppose and not infrequently establish an increase in population in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: Michael Hendy, Cécile Morrisson, Mango, Judith Herrin, Kazhdan, and Alan Harvey in an important synthesis of 1989.²³ For Macedonia, I do not see a different situation, including the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Continuous founding of new villages from the tenth century until the 1347 plague, progressive recession of the forest, evidenced by the Athos archives, increase in population in those villages for which census data enable us to compare the situation in the early twelfth century to that in the early fourteenth (in those villages the population nearly doubled), constitute definitive evidence of a demographic rise.²⁴ Besides, such a rise has been proved by Laiou, who showed that a young couple circa 1300 had an average of 3.5 surviving children.²⁵ According to Martin's study, the same global situation prevailed in southern Italy.²⁶ As to Asia Minor, the Byzantine historian Pachymeres stresses the prosperity of late thirteenth-century Bithynia and suggests that the area was then densely populated.²⁷

Byzantine witnesses noted the effects of the 1347 plague. Gregoras pointed out that it killed on all shores, affecting city and countryside equally. Cantacuzenos mentions Macedonia among the afflicted areas. A saint's Life reveals that in Mount Athos it had exterminated most monks of the monastery of Lavra by 1352. Secondary waves of plague are attested in Lemnos island in 1362, in Thessaloniki in 1366 and 1371, as well as at Athos in 1378. In western Chalkidiki, it is known through Athos archives that fourteen villages were abandoned during the second half of the fourteenth century, or at any rate between 1321 and 1409, and there are reasons to believe that the number of desertions was much higher. It appears that wherever the population did not die out, it decreased by more than half. Byzantine and Ottoman fiscal documents show a strong but slow recovery in the fifteenth century, and it is not certain that the demographic deficit caused by the Great Plague was everywhere compensated for by the end of the fifteenth century.²⁸

²² W. Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780–842* (Stanford, 1988).

²³ M. F. Hendy, "Byzantium 1081–1204, An Economic Reappraisal," *The Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 20 (1970), 31–52; C. Morrisson, "La dévaluation de la monnaie byzantine au XI^e siècle: Essai d'interprétation," *TM* 6 (1976), 28–29; C. Mango, "Les monuments de l'architecture du XI^e siècle et leur signification historique et sociale," *ibid.*, 351–65; J. Herrin, "The Ecclesiastical Organization of Central Greece at the Time of Michael Choniates: New Evidence from the Codex Atheniensis 1371," *Actes du XVe Congrès International d'Etudes Byzantines, Athènes, 1976*, IV (Athens, 1980), 131–37; A. Kazhdan, "Two Notes on Byzantine Demography of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *ByzF* 8 (1982), 115–22; Harvey, *Expansion*, 35–79.

²⁴ P. Bellier et al., *Paysages de Macédoine* (Paris, 1986), 99–116; Lefort, "Population et peuplement," 69–75.

²⁵ Laiou, *Peasant Society*, 290.

²⁶ J. Lefort and J.-M. Martin, "L'organisation de l'espace rural: Macédoine et Italie du sud (Xe–XIII^e siècle)," in *Hommes et richesses* II, 14–16.

²⁷ Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. Failler, vol. I (Paris, 1984), 33.

²⁸ Lefort, "Population et peuplement," 78–82.

What needs to be stressed is that notwithstanding periodic short-term crises, there appears to have been for five centuries, from the ninth to the thirteenth, a continuous and probably very significant demographic rise.

The Organization of Space

Since proto-Byzantine times, the organization of space was shaped by a duality in the social organization: on the one hand communities of small owners, which most often corresponded to villages, on the other large estates and individual dwellings. Nowhere until the tenth century, except in Egypt until the seventh, does the documentation allow us to determine whether or not the village pattern predominates over the estate pattern. It is obvious that regional conditions play an important role, and it is not to be expected that the same organization be found on the Anatolian plateau and in the plains near Thessaloniki.

On the genesis of Byzantine villages, we know but little. The scarcity of archaeological surveys, which would yield the most relevant evidence, compounded with the diversity of local situations, must necessarily make us cautious. Studies by Georges Tchalenko and Tate on fourth- through sixth-century northern Syrian villages are significant exceptions.²⁹ An important symposium on proto-Byzantine Illyricum, the proceedings of which were published in 1984, had no study on rural dwelling.³⁰ There are some faint indications that villages, whether or not derived from Roman establishments, occur earlier in Bithynia and Macedonia than in southern Italy. Here and there, in some sectors of Italy and the Balkans, one is tempted to draw the picture of an original Roman ground of scattered dwelling, upon which, around the sixth to seventh centuries, peasants would have regrouped in elevated fortified shelters above the sites of the future medieval villages.³¹ Nothing, however, indicates that this pattern was general.

As to Macedonia, the Athos archives shed light on the situation as it was from the ninth century onward. Other than a few large landholdings, which were surely exploited but of whose dwelling organization we know nothing, land was divided into a network of large village districts, averaging from 15 to 20 square kilometers. The village district, usually situated at the foot of a mountain, often combined a mountain section and a flat section. It was suitable for an extensive economy, in which, aside from cultivation of fields, the gathering of wild fruit and the raising of pigs in the forest played important roles. Land was far from exploited to its fullest by the peasant communities.³²

Beginning in the tenth century, the demographic rise led to the development of hamlets on estates located in the outskirts of the village districts, initially below on the best lots, and later above on the slopes—lands that were more difficult to farm. The rural landscape was thus, over the space of a few centuries, totally occupied.³³

The inevitable consequence of the demographic rise was the increase in cultivated

²⁹G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord: Le Massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1953–58); Tate, "Les campagnes."

³⁰*Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin* (= Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome 77) (Rome, 1984).

³¹Lefort, "Population et peuplement," 68; J.-M. Martin in *Hommes et richesses* II, 85.

³²Lefort, "Population et peuplement," 66–68.

³³*Ibid.*, 69–72.

land area at the expense of forest, pasture lands progressively receding into the mountain slopes.³⁴ Another result—in Macedonia as in southern Italy—was the progressive organization of planted lands into homogeneous groups, in other words, a more rational use of land, which was no longer superabundant. The diversity in planting was very great, whether cereals, grapes, fruit trees, and vegetables were planted together or separately, according to local conditions which, in the Mediterranean world, change almost with every kilometer. But we can see everywhere a progressive homogenization of the land, which lost the last vestiges of natural vegetation between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. This organization of space, as well as the establishment of ditches and dividing walls to keep animals away from vineyards, orchards, and gardens, facilitated common pasturing in the fields. What we know of the cereals grown, associated with leguminous plants, at least from the twelfth century onward, and of sowing density³⁵ suggests a relatively sophisticated system of agriculture, based on the practice of biennial rotation of cultivation and catch cropping. The practice of irrigation, ordinarily in connection with water diversion for mills, is well documented for productive plots, and that of drainage is likely. We also find mention, in some regions, of industrial crops such as flax or mulberry. For obvious reasons of economic rationality, the plantings that yielded most, and required the most work as well as, probably, manuring, usually formed a first ring around the village. Next came the fields, to which access from the village was given by a network of paths forming a star. And finally came the uncultivated land. The latter, long unused, was also incorporated when the population grew, and as the forest and pasture land became rarer. Long controlled by the peasant communities, and then falling under the jurisdiction of the state, the aristocracy, or the monasteries toward the eleventh century, the uncultivated area was subject to regulations: peasants were refused the right to cut trees, required to obtain pasturing permits, obliged to respect specific passageways when leading herds to higher pasture, and submitted to fishing rules.³⁶

In summary, the demographic rise brought about a more economic management and a more rational organization of space.

II. ECONOMY AND CIRCULATION

The Predominance of the Family Holding

As Svoronos pointed out as early as 1956, the Byzantine rural economy remained based on the small family holding, regardless of the status of people or the rights of the peasants to the land.³⁷ The surface area of the lands thus exploited depended on local conditions and, perhaps especially, on population density, as Harvey has shown.³⁸ In these conditions, it is difficult to speak of the “average farm.” In twelfth- and fourteenth-

³⁴ Idem, “Population et paysage,” 217–18.

³⁵ N. Kondov, “Über den wahrscheinlichen Weizenantrag auf der Balkanhalbinsel im Mittelalter,” *EtBalk* 10 (1974), 108.

³⁶ Lefort-Martin, “L’organisation,” 17–25.

³⁷ N. Svoronos, “Sur quelques formes de la vie rurale à Byzance, petite et grande exploitation,” *Annales ESC* 11 (1956), 325–35.

³⁸ A. Harvey, “Economic Expansion in Central Greece in the Eleventh Century,” *BMGS* 8 (1982–83), 21–28; idem, *Expansion*, 63.

century Macedonia, a typical farm must have comprised approximately four people, not, as is often said, a full team of cattle,³⁹ but only half a team—which implied agreements between families to effect the plowing—some small livestock, a few small garden or vineyard parcels, and fields. The latter constituted the bulk of the cultivated land.

Lacking supporting documents, and probably in accordance with the hypothesis that there were poor yields, it has been supposed, as I have said, that the cultivated lands were vast. One notes, however, in recent historiography, that the estimates of surface area in this typical farm have decreased with regularity: from 100 modioi (approximately 10 hectares, or 25 acres) according to Svoronos in 1956, to 60 modioi in 1977 for Laiou and for Michel Kaplan in 1986, and to 50 modioi in 1989, at a minimum, in Harvey's opinion.⁴⁰ But, as early as 1974, an important paper of a Bulgarian agronomist, Nicolas Kondov, suggested a figure of about 30 modioi.⁴¹ Based on several documents housed in the Mount Athos archives, I believe that, as concerns twelfth- to fourteenth-century Macedonia, we must further lower our estimates to 25 modioi: such a small amount of land surely constitutes a minimum;⁴² by comparison, in fifteenth-century Lemnos, an island devastated by the plague, land holdings were indeed far larger.⁴³ Simultaneously, the bibliography—if not reality—shows an increase in the cereal yields; leaving aside the implausible 2 to 1 ratio suggested by K. V. Hvostova,⁴⁴ we note that the 3 to 1 ratio first advanced by Svoronos goes up to 3.5 to 1 in his 1976 study, and further to 4, or even 5 to 1 in an article by Nicolas Oikonomides.⁴⁵ In his above-mentioned study, Kondov had advanced a ratio of 5 to 1, which I consider, on the basis of certain Athos documents, to be a minimum both for wheat and barley in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁶

Thus, the difference between the various estimates is enormous: 400% for the size of landholdings and 66% for yields. Therefore, the calculations made concerning the results of a family farm—upon which major conclusions have been based as to the fate of the Eastern Empire—are worthless, being deprived of solid ground. Efforts made at estimating the amount of taxation are not always convincing, and it may be appropriate to confine ourselves to a comment of Tate: "tax is always too heavy."⁴⁷

However, two conclusions can be drawn: one, as to the historiography, the "Byzantine peasant" of 1991 has a smaller holding, and an easier job than that of 1950, all the while producing more and more cereal; and two, as to history, only one thing is sure: Byzantine peasantry did not die out, which it would inevitably have done if the pessimistic evaluations of economic results long advanced were true. Though it is widely

³⁹ M. Kaplan, "Pour un modèle économique de l'exploitation agricole byzantine: Problèmes de méthode et premiers résultats," *Histoire et Mesure* 3 (1988), 221–34, see p. 222.

⁴⁰ Svoronos, "Formes," 332; Laiou, *Peasant Society*, 70; Kaplan, "L'économie," 206; Harvey, *Expansion*, 180.

⁴¹ Kondov, "Weizenertrag," 101 (a well-to-do peasant would have cultivated 75 modioi).

⁴² Lefort, "Population et paysage," 219–21.

⁴³ *Actes du Pantocratur*, ed. V. Kravari (Paris, 1991), 193.

⁴⁴ K. V. Hvostova, *Osobennosti agrarnopravovykh otnoshenij v pozdnej Vizantii XIV–XV vv* (Moscow, 1968), 75.

⁴⁵ Svoronos, "Cadastre," 141; idem, "Remarques," 57; Oikonomides, "Terres du fisc," 336.

⁴⁶ Kondov, "Weizenertrag," 108; Lefort, "Population et paysage," 222; idem, "Une exploitation de taille moyenne au XIIIe siècle en Chalcidique," in *Aphieroma ston Niko Svorono*, vol. I (Rethymno, 1986), 369 (for barley).

⁴⁷ Tate, "Les campagnes," 75.

admitted, without firm basis, that yields did not evolve during the Byzantine Middle ages, it seems unlikely that the decrease in average holding area during the long period of rise came about without any technical progress. The practice of catch cropping, which must have been imposed by the exiguity of the holdings, must certainly have increased cereal yield; and, over time, peasants multiplied investments (roads, mills, irrigation channels, ditches) which progressively increased their productivity and diminished, if only a little, the poverty of the countryside.

The landlords often managed, through an intendant, a farm, located on a portion of their estate. From the eleventh century onward, we know that the aristocracy practiced large-scale breeding of livestock, especially of horses, on high pastureland.⁴⁸ The strictly agricultural side of their farming is less well documented; the estates comprised a manor house and farm buildings, called "metochia" on monastic estates; field work was probably done by peasants as a form of owed service or *corvée*. But this system of farming seems to have been only marginal.

These aristocratic farms must have been similar to that managed by Theodosios Skaranos in thirteenth-century Chalkidiki. Skaranos was neither an aristocrat nor a peasant, but a burgher from Thessaloniki, a widower turned monk, who had connections in the emperor's entourage. He obtained a small estate, granted by the emperor, along with the tax revenue of a dozen or so peasants, and led the life of a gentleman farmer in the monastery he acquired. There he housed about fourteen people and cultivated 24 modioi of vineyard, and perhaps as much as 300 modioi of land, with his own livestock and tools, and the labor of his "paroikoi." The surplus of his production—wheat and mostly wine—Skaranos evidently sold in Thessaloniki.⁴⁹

Circulation

Some traditionalist Byzantine aristocrats, such as Cecaumenos in the eleventh century, advocated an ideal of self-sufficiency:⁵⁰ thereupon, some modern scholars have rather quickly derived the notion of an economy in which trade was at a minimum, this concerning a time when, in fact, exchanges were increasing.⁵¹ It has also been stressed that monetary circulation was low in the empire, which is certainly true,⁵² as well as that peasants were attached to the land, which is not so certain. Thus, the picture that has been presented to us is that of a world not only stagnating, but frozen, where everyone attempted to live—or survive, in the case of the peasants—off the land. However, without denying the sluggishness inherent in any traditional economy, one may underscore, to the contrary, that there was a great and constant circulation of people in the Byzantine rural world, while that of currency and wealth, far from ever ceasing, tended to accelerate.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, about the wealth of Symbatios Pakurianos and his wife, *Actes d'Iviron*, ed. J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides, and D. Papachryssanthou, 2 vols. (Paris, 1985–90), II, 174.

⁴⁹ Lefort, "Une exploitation."

⁵⁰ Cecaumenos, *Strategikon*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1898; repr. Amsterdam, 1965), 36.

⁵¹ Kaplan, "L'économie," 199–205 ("L'autarcie").

⁵² C. Morrisson, "Monnaie et finances dans l'empire byzantin, Xe–XIVe siècle," in *Hommes et richesses* II, 293–95.

While it is doubtless true that the proto-Byzantine administrative principle of heredity of conditions remained valid through the end of the empire, it is nonetheless true that individuals always moved frequently. In tenth-century Macedonia, we know of peasant owners who, having sought refuge on estates to evade fiscal obligations, were “repossessed” by the tax administration: they were thus forced, if not to return to their villages, to pay up their taxes.⁵³ As to the tenants, whom we call, as I have said, “dependents”—this without denying their juridical freedom but also without assessing what their “dependence” consisted of—it is not surprising that their place of residence would have been the object of agreements with the landlord. Ostrogorsky has insisted that the “paroikoi had certainly no right to move about.”⁵⁴ Yet fiscal documents show numerous cases of “paroikoi” owning a few parcels of vineyard, and taxed, on that count, in one village, but residing elsewhere. For them, too, the obligations appear to have been strictly fiscal, and did not, in my view, keep them from moving about. Furthermore, while fiscal obligation was transmitted hereditarily, as Laiou has pointed out, it affected only one of the descendants of the taxpayer.⁵⁵

Another question, which has not always been distinguished from that of juridical status, is that of the degree of stability of the peasant population. Mobility was great, as a result of the precariousness of the peasant condition and of a stronger demography than has been supposed. Fourteenth-century fiscal documents show that at least 10 to 15% of the taxpayers came from elsewhere, either from very far away or from a village in the area. The well-to-do were the most firmly established; to the contrary, the immigration rate reached 100% in some hamlets where peasants had recently arrived in response to the call of a landlord desirous of developing his estate.⁵⁶ It was poverty that caused peasants to move, but their mobility was doubtless a factor of economic growth.

Currency, whether gold, silver, or bronze, never ceased to circulate in the Byzantine countryside, at least as payment for the land tax levied on owners, at all times, as it seems. To be sure, it must be added at once that currency was scarce in the eighth to ninth centuries and that there was always a shortage of it, especially in inland regions; however, according to Morrisson, the considerable growth of the number of bronze coins from the late tenth century onward and the diversification of monetary types in the eleventh century are signs of an increasing role of money in exchange;⁵⁷ according to the same author, the devaluation of currency, in the first half of the eleventh century, seems to be linked with economic expansion.⁵⁸ Let us add that the monetary portion of the tax structure grew at the same time, as a result, among other matters, of the conversion of military obligations bearing on certain lands into a monetary tax.⁵⁹ The rent price of the land (*pakton*) was also fixed in gold coins, and in some cases, at least, paid

⁵³ *Actes d'Ivireon* I, no. 2. It must be noted in passing that their income was sufficient to allow them not only to pay the charges they owed as tenants on fields of the estate, but also to pay the taxes levied on the land they owned and had abandoned, a clear sign that their budgets were not so tight.

⁵⁴ Ostrogorsky, *Paysannerie*, 68.

⁵⁵ Laiou, *Peasant Society*, 142–57 (“The status of paroikos”).

⁵⁶ Séminaire de J. Lefort à l'E. P. H. E., “Anthroponymie et société villageoise, Xe–XIVe siècle,” in *Hommes et richesses* II, 235.

⁵⁷ Morrisson, “Monnaie et finances,” 299–301.

⁵⁸ Idem, “Le dévaluation”; idem, “Monnaie et finances,” 305–6.

⁵⁹ *Actes de Dionysou*, ed. N. Oikonomides (Paris, 1968), 39; Harvey, *Expansion*, 109–14.

in currency.⁶⁰ It is true that the sharecroppers paid their duties in sheaves of wheat, and that a portion of the tax was, until the fourteenth century, paid in kind. But the fact remains that, at that time, almost all peasants must have paid a tax, albeit minimal, in currency. The need for more and more peasants to procure coins was probably at least one cause of the growth of trade.

Wealth, which, directly or not, was mostly derived from the land, was concentrated in the city; the existence, after the tenth century, of a more numerous urban population created a demand. The trade circuits through which farm products came into the urban market are poorly known. The landlords, whom we see garnering in their manors duties paid in kind,⁶¹ must have played a predominant role. Speros Vryonis has stressed the importance of fairs in the organization of trade; these fairs were ordinarily held outside a church on the saint's feastday, sometimes near great cities, often in the middle of the countryside.⁶² We can assume that peasants had more direct access to this form of trade.

I shall add that between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, the development of craftsmanship in the villages is another sign of the growth of exchanges. In Macedonian villages, the number of peasants practicing at least part-time craft activities doubled in that period. In the fourteenth century, shoemakers are found in half the villages, followed, in order of decreasing frequency, by blacksmiths, tailors, weavers, potters, woodcutters, fishermen, and millers. Other peasants, forming a fiscal class of their own (the *onikatoi*), seem to have busied themselves with transportation. In a village that was perhaps exceptionally large, Radolibos (more than 200 households at the beginning of the fourteenth century), we find at that time twenty-three shoemaker peasants with at least four family workshops, each comprising from two to four craftsmen, and seven potters, including two workshops, comprising for the one three, for the other two craftsmen.⁶³ Thus, we discover a real specialization of work, which leads us to suppose a high level of exchanges, reaching certainly in some cases beyond the limits of the village.

In summary, the organization of the rural economy became more and more complex.

III. RURAL SOCIETY

Owners and "Paroikoi"

Based on administrative texts, a highly contrasting picture of rural society has been presented to us, in which the small "free" owner is opposed to the *paroikos*. But two objections must be put forth.

First, it is probably true that, since the sixth century at least, the basic charge levied on the tenant (*pakton*) was higher—theoretically double—than that levied on the owner (tax). But we must deduce that the difference was in fact not unbearable, since the tenth

⁶⁰ Oikonomides, "Terres du fisc," 329.

⁶¹ *Actes d'Ivroun* II, no. 47, 1.15.

⁶² S. Vryonis, "The Panegyris of the Byzantine Saint: A Study in the Nature of a Medieval Institution, its Origins and Fate," in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel (London, 1981), 196–226.

⁶³ Séminaire de l'E. P. H. E., "Anthroponymie," 236–38.

century witnesses a massive move onto the estates.⁶⁴ These estates were often exempt from the many extraordinary charges bearing on small ownership, and the tenants further enjoyed the protection of the landlord: two factors that are difficult, if not impossible, to account for precisely.⁶⁵ I am not convinced that, in the end, the situation of the tenant was always less enviable than that of the small owner.

Second, the generalized use of the word "paroikos" to refer to peasants from the eleventh century onward has long seemed proof of a massive change in the status of peasantry. It is now clear that what happened was somewhat different. In the tenth century, we see the state more often than previously repaying services or granting rewards by attributing fiscal revenues of certain villages directly to civil servants or beneficiaries. Because the taxpayers of these villages then no longer paid their taxes to the state but to a beneficiary, it became the habit, in the second half of the eleventh century, to call these taxpayers "paroikoi," even though they were still owners.⁶⁶ We can only note this semantic broadening of the word "paroikos." To be sure, it is not insignificant: it testifies to the fact that the distinction between owner and tenant peasants was becoming blurred, fading in front of the only opposition truly significant at that time in rural society, that between aristocracy and peasants. It was during that period indeed (in Macedonia at least) that the former "communes" formed by the taxpayers of a village—which, for a century or two, had seen their territories diminished by the progress of big landholdings, especially those of the state—disappeared in many places, and were replaced by a landlord, the emperor, certain monasteries, and by members of the aristocracy, or rather by their intendants (*pronoetai*).⁶⁷ It is possible to describe the situation in terms of Roman law—as the tax administration and the judges tried to do, more or less successfully—and thus to distinguish, among the aristocracy's estates, what constitutes private property and what pertains to granted fiscal rights, and similarly, among peasant holdings, what is owned and what is rented. But the distinction was not always so clear for the Byzantines themselves. Regarding the peasants, it is known, certainly from the thirteenth century onward, but probably before, that most of them were both owners and tenants: almost always owners of high-yield parcels (vineyards, gardens), often tenants of their fields and the uncultivated area. Thus, the opposition upon which the rural history of Byzantium has been built is less strong than has been stated.

Paroikoi and Landlords

Social relationships between the estate-holders and the peasants who worked their fields were evidently inegalitarian. Officially, the former felt compassion for the latter, whom they protected, and the latter were full of respect and gratitude for the former. Reality may sometimes have been different.

In my opinion, the most significant matter lies elsewhere: from the tenth century onward the social organization of the countryside became more complex. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the taxpaying peasants had only fiscal intercourse with authorities,

⁶⁴ *Actes de Lavra* I, ed. P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, and N. Svoronos (Paris, 1970), no. 6; *Iviron* I, no. 2 and 10.

⁶⁵ Oikonomides, "Terres du fisc," 328.

⁶⁶ *Iviron* II, 83–84.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

a rather weak link in times of trouble. Later on, while the villages became interwoven in a network of small fortified towns, the villagers were administrated by the intendants of the estates. It would seem that in an empire where safety was greater, the income from the land came to be considered too important a matter to be left any longer in the hands of the peasant communities. It is likely that these intendants played a role in the economic development of the countryside: their interest, or rather that of their masters, was to facilitate the management of the small family holdings. We have examples of contracts showing how estate-holders and peasants could join forces to repair and exploit a vineyard or a mill.

The Evolution of the Village Society

Personal names, or rather the mode of designation of peasants in fiscal documents, shed light on social relationships within the village. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, a peasant was succinctly identified by reference to his father's name, as if his condition reduced itself to the inheritance of his father's rights and obligations. In the twelfth century, kinship relations used to identify the taxpayers are more numerous, as are nicknames, either personal or shared by a kin; and those tendencies gain strength between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. From the evolution of the modes of designation, one is tempted to infer an evolution of rural society: it would seem that in a society where kin had become a stronger structure than in preceding centuries, intermediate between house and village, personal nicknames underlined the relative autonomy of individuals supported by kin solidarity (the peasant no longer being solely the heir of his father), while other nicknames signify the social importance of the kin. One finds hints, in those families, of strategies of marriage or land-sharing—albeit modest.⁶⁸ Whatever the case, it seems that peasants lived, in the fourteenth century more clearly than before, in connection with other households, in villages where, as I have said, specialized professions had appeared. The rural society was more open, more diversified, much less precarious than that of the ninth.

The most precise written sources, laws, regulations, and fiscal documents depict the Byzantine countryside from the point of view of the state, to which historiography has long remained faithful: the administration wanted everyone to stay in his place and nothing to change. But reality was different, and the state itself had to adjust to changes it had little control over. More diverse sources—among them archaeological surveys—more careful studies, and other ways of thinking, show today that in Byzantium, as in the West, the history of the countryside is first and foremost that of a rise, marked by a growing organization of landscape, economy, and society.

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⁶⁸Séminaire de l'E. P. H. E., "Anthroponymie," 230–34.